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ABSTRACT

For student affairs, a professional field heretofore dominated by the positivistic design structure imposed by quantitative research methodology and traditional graduate research courses, an increased utilization of an alternative methodology, the qualitative, would lead to a greatly expanded range of researchable questions. The use of qualitative research approaches can greatly expand the breadth and depth of the understanding of the student in higher education as a developing participant in his or her own learning process. (ABL)

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Qualitative Research in Student Affairs

Paul A. Bloland

Overview

While most graduate preparation programs in college student affairs and counseling tend to provide research training that emphasizes statistical comparisons (i.e., experimental designs) or numerical description (i.e., surveys), an approach based upon the traditional positivistic scientific method of solving problems, it is becoming more and more clear that our understanding of college students and their culture is unnecessarily circumscribed if we rely only on the information provided by quantitative research. Fortunately there appears to be an increased acceptance of qualitative research methods at the same time that we are becoming more cognizant of the complexity of college student development and its environmental setting (Caple, 1991). (The September, 1991 Special Edition of the *Journal of College Student Development* was devoted to qualitative research methods in student affairs). Student affairs professionals, most of whose graduate training has been limited to the traditional quantitative research methodologies favored by the field of psychology, need to be aware of the qualitative alternative and the types of data that it may yield for our greater understanding of college students and the cultural ecology of the campus.

What is Qualitative Research?

Although the dichotomy is too simplistic, we tend to think of research as being categorized as quantitative, using numbers as data to describe events or establish relationships between events (positivism), or qualitative, using words as data to describe human experience or behavior (phenomenological). Qualitative research had its origins in the types of field research conducted by anthropologists as they observed the day-to-day lives of their subjects. The qualitative approach became standard for sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s but never became popular among educators and psychologists who relied primarily on their adaptation of the empirical methods utilized by physical scientists engaged in a search for relationships and causes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). What these qualitative approaches have in common is a reliance on the written or spoken word or the observable behavior of the person being studied as the principal source of data for analysis. The purpose of such research is a greater understanding of the world as seen from the unique viewpoint of the people being studied.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research

Because qualitative research is often defined by how it differs from quantitative research, it may be helpful to compare the two approaches. A major difference lies in their fundamentally different assumptions about the goals of research. Babbie (1983), for example, has defined qualitative analysis as "the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observation for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships" (p. 537) as opposed to quantitative research, "the numerical representation and manipulation of observations for the purpose of describing and explaining the phenomena that those observations reflect" (p. 537).

The differences between the two approaches, then, result because each is defining problems differently and each is looking for different solutions or answers. As defined above, qualitative methods lend themselves to discovering meanings and patterns while quantitative methods seek causes and relationships demonstrated statistically, a theoretical perspective, positivism, that is concerned with facts, prediction, and causation and not the subjective nature of the groups or individuals of interest. Researchers in the qualitative mode seek understanding through inductive analysis, moving from specific observation to the general. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, employs deductive logic, moving from the general to the specific, i.e., from theory to experience.

Qualitative Methodologies

In a sense, qualitative research is also defined by the research methodologies or procedures employed to obtain the subjective data that form the basis for analysis and further understanding. While social scientists differ widely among themselves about the categorization of qualitative research and the terminology used to describe it, there are three approaches that appear to be the principal methods currently employed: observation, both participant and direct; qualitative interviewing, from unstructured to structured; and unobtrusive research, including the study of documents.

Observation

Participant observation refers to the collection of data by observers who become involved for a relatively long period of time in a field setting such as a student organization, long enough to observe group and individual interactions as the participants repeat and evolve behaviors. Participant observers, while involved in the setting, have no personal stake in what occurs but are sufficiently detached to find the time to observe and record routine and unusual activities and interactions as they occur naturally and spontaneously in the field setting. Direct observation or nonparticipant observation, in contrast, sets the researcher aside as an uninvolved reporter, as a member of an audience, so to speak.

Qualitative Interviewing

We use interviewing to gain access to ideas, thoughts, emotions, etc., that we can't readily identify through observation alone. There are several types of interviews that are particularly useful in qualitative research. In the unstructured approach the interviewer has no theory or presupposition about what to expect from the encounter and, consequently, does not formulate questions in advance but, after introducing the topic, allows the interview

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conversation to follow the interviewee's lead. The interviews are later analyzed to determine recurrent themes or patterns. For an example of phenomenological interviewing see Attinasi's (1991) qualitative study of the meaning of going to college for a group of Mexican-American students.

Interviews may also be more structured with a set of predetermined topics used, or even with a standardized interview consisting of questions to be answered by each respondent. While interviewer flexibility and responsiveness is more limited when structured interviews are employed, structuring reduces variability and makes more efficient use of time than does the unstructured approach.

Unobtrusive Research

Practitioners of unobtrusive or nonreactive research take the position that the researcher must not become a part of what is being studied and must not have any effect upon it. Consequently, the researcher examines already available evidence, usually after the fact, and attempts to draw generalizations and conclusions. A form of unobtrusive research, content analysis, involves the examination of written documents such as personal diaries, course essays, or student newspapers. Historical research which uses existing sources, primary and secondary, to reconstruct the past is clearly unobtrusive.

When Are Qualitative Methods Indicated?

The research method chosen to study a problem should be compatible with the questions being asked. The method should service the kind of knowledge being sought rather than the other way around. One should not approach an investigation by looking for an excuse to use one's qualitative research skills but should, instead, ask, "What kind of an approach is most likely to give me the best answers to my research questions?"

For example, the qualitatively-oriented researcher is less likely to be interested in questions that seek to identify cause and effect, that answer the question, "Why?", than in questions that ask, "What?", "How?", or "Who?" An answer to the latter questions requires that the researcher access the internal experiences of the person being studied. They can't be answered by identifying the variables in advance because we don't know the dimensions of the phenomenon being studied before we talk to the participants. Qualitative research approaches thus appear to be most appropriate for the study of complex organizations such as student affairs programs, and for the study of complex processes such as roommate selection and adaptation.

Reaching Conclusions

As might be expected, the typical study results in a mass of information in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, documents, tape recordings, in short, in a plethora of words. The researcher must somehow recast this information in a form that makes it more readily usable so that meaning can be teased out of it. Miles and Huberman (1984) consider data analysis as consisting of "three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 21).

Data reduction refers to the process of taking that mass of words and selecting some of it for summarizing or paraphrasing so that the result is a more succinct and easier to handle representation of the whole. While it may be necessary at times to use numbers they should always be accompanied by the words behind the numbers. By data display, Miles and Huberman mean the organization of the information in the form of graphs, charts, matrices, and networks so that it is in a readily accessible and compact form.

Finally, the researcher must decide what the data mean. At the same time the investigator is attempting to verify the conclusions, testing them for sources of error. Do they hold up as rational, plausible inferences based upon the data analysis? Verification performs for qualitative research what reliability and validity perform for quantitative research.

Conclusion

For student affairs, a professional field heretofore dominated by the positivistic design structure imposed by quantitative research methodology and traditional graduate research courses, an increased utilization of an alternative methodology, the qualitative, would lead to a greatly expanded range of researchable questions. Much of student affairs and counseling research has been characterized by carefully circumscribed and narrowly focused questions designed to illuminate causality and relationship. However, the environment of a college campus and its student culture represents a very rich and complex social structure that cannot readily be studied holistically by statistical means alone. Certainly it is clear that the interior life of the college student is largely inaccessible to objective instruments and quantitative approaches. The use of qualitative research approaches, alone or in combination with quantitative methods in the same study (for example, see Luzzo, 1991), can greatly expand the breadth and depth of our understanding of the student in higher education as a developing participant in his or her own learning process.

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